Grammatical Analysis of ἐνετειλάμην in Matthew 28:20

The form **ἐνετειλάμην** is the first-person singular **aorist middle indicative** of ἐντέλλομαι ("to command, charge, direct"), built on the aorist stem ἐνετειλα- with the primary middle ending -μην. Morphologically, it is unambiguous: the augment (ἐ-), the aorist active/middle stem, and the secondary middle ending all fix it as an aorist indicative, not a present or a subjunctive.

The Aorist as "Indefinite"

The traditional grammatical label for the Greek aorist is indeed "indefinite" (from Greek *ἀόριστος*, "without boundaries/undefined"). This is the terminology used by classical grammarians (e.g., Dionysius Thrax) and preserved by A.E. Knoch and the Concordant Literal tradition. The aorist, in itself, expresses **aspect** (the action viewed as a whole, undefined as to internal progress) rather than strictly encoding **time**. Time in Greek is chiefly a function of the indicative mood plus context, not of the tense-stem alone.

Can the Aorist Indicative Refer to Non-Past Action?

Standard reference grammars (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*; Burton, *Moods and Tenses*; Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*; Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the NT*) all acknowledge that the aorist indicative, while *typically* past-referring, is not exclusively so. Recognized non-past uses of the aorist indicative include:

- **Gnomic aorist** — timeless/proverbial truths (e.g., 1 Peter 1:24, "the grass withered").
- **Proleptic (futuristic) aorist** — a future event spoken of as already accomplished (e.g., John 13:31, "the Son of Man *was glorified*"; Romans 8:30, "them he *glorified*").
- **Epistolary aorist** — the writer's standpoint projected to the reader's time.
- **Dramatic/performative aorist** — action coincident with the moment of speaking (e.g., Matthew 9:18, "my daughter *has just died*"; the classic "I hereby ..." usage).
- **Timeless aorist** — in general statements and in subordinate clauses where temporal reference is supplied by context.

Porter goes further and argues that the aorist encodes **only** perfective aspect, with temporal reference being entirely pragmatic/contextual — a view which, whether fully accepted or not, underscores that there is no hard grammatical rule forcing ἐνετειλάμην into English past tense.

Application to Matthew 28:20

The clause reads: *διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν*. Two grammatical observations are relevant:

- **Subordinate relative clause with ὅσα** ("whatever, as many things as"): the relative is indefinite/generalizing, and the verb inside such clauses often takes its temporal coloring from the matrix verb (here the present participle διδάσκοντες and the implied ongoing mission extending "to the consummation of the eon"). In a generalizing relative clause, the aorist can function as a **timeless/gnomic** aorist summarizing the totality of the speaker's charge as a single bundle, without locking it to past time.
- **Perfective aspect applied to a body of instruction:** viewing "all that I direct/charge you" as one complete whole is exactly what the aorist aspect does. English has no native perfective non-past, so translators typically reach for a past ("commanded") or perfect ("have commanded"); but a simple present ("whatever I direct/command") is a legitimate way to render a timeless/summary aorist, especially inside an indefinite relative clause.

Verdict on "Whatever I Direct / Command"

Strictly on linguistic grounds:

- The rendering is **not a morphological distortion** — the aorist indicative is aspectually perfective and temporally under-specified; "indefinite" is a defensible (and historically attested) label for it.
- The rendering is **grammatically permissible** under recognized categories (gnomic/timeless aorist, aorist in an indefinite relative clause, and, in aspect-prominent analyses like Porter's, the default non-temporal reading of the aorist).
- It is **not the most natural English default**, because (a) narrative aorist indicatives in the Gospels overwhelmingly refer to past events, and (b) the immediate discourse context (Jesus speaking to the Eleven after completed earthly teaching) makes a past/perfect rendering the expected pragmatic choice. Most grammarians would classify this particular token as a straightforward past-referring aorist.

So: a translator who renders ἐνετειλάμην as "whatever I direct/command" is exploiting a real, recognized grammatical latitude of the Greek aorist indicative — specifically its aspectual (rather than strictly temporal) nature and its behavior in indefinite relative clauses — even if most exegetes judge the past/perfect rendering more contextually probable. The Concordant choice is linguistically **allowable**, not linguistically **required or preferred**.